

# Much Marcle Stores – Much Transformed

By Beth Whitaker



Shopkeeper Bill Bowers well remembers the reaction of the RSA's Ken Parsons when he first walked into the Bowers' small village store in Much Marcle in the heart of rural Herefordshire.

"Herefordshire County Council had arranged for us to benefit from a visit from the RSA to help us look at our business," recalls Bill, who, with wife Lyn and family has run the store for 22 years. "Ken walked in, looked around, laughed, and asked us which era we thought we were living in!"

But Ken's reaction, coupled with his good advice, proved to be just what the Bowers needed to turn their business around. "I suppose we had just let the business trickle along; everything was a bit old fashioned, with odd shelves, everything higgledy-piggledy," said Bill. "Ken told us that if we continued like that, the shop would just die – and he recommended a complete refit. He was pointing out the obvious really, but we just needed a kick up the backside!"

Ken's enthusiasm and ideas were infectious – but the decision to spend the necessary £35,000 was complicated. "Like all other rural Post Offices at the time, we were on hold," said Bill. "We knew if the PO closed, it would not have been worth investing our savings and getting a loan to do the refit."

But once their Post Office was reprieved, it was full steam ahead in Much Marcle. With the help of Gerwyn Williams, Retail Development Manager of their wholesaler, Bookers, Bill and Lyn got quotes from three different shop fitters to transform the layout of the 900 sq ft premises. "We chose SJR Shopfitters in the end because they were down to earth, understood what we wanted and were affordable. Colin Rundle from SJR had also given a couple of talks at our local RSA meetings, so we knew he was reliable."

The refit was total. New floor and false ceiling, lighting, a totally new layout – about all that was left of the old shop was the post office counter, and even that has been cleverly integrated into the bright new look. Once the fitters had finished their transformation, it was the turn of Booker to come up trumps and fill the new shelving and units.



"We have always traded with Booker, but we had no idea how helpful they would be," said Bill. "Once the new fittings were in place, Gerwyn organised two merchandisers from Booker to spend two weeks with us, putting our stock back out. But there were quite a few gaps, as so much more selling space had been created. I asked what the spaces were for and Mike, the Booker merchandiser, just said: 'Now we go shopping!' and we did, filling the space with stock from Booker's top 500 lines. We are now also part of their Shop Local promotional club, which means we get excellent monthly offers which we highlight with POS leaflets, posters and on the website."

Bill and Lyn also support local suppliers and stock ham and meats from a local butcher, freshly baked bread – and Westons cider!



And the new-look shop has made a huge difference to business. "We were on a slippery slope, but it's all looking good now," said Bill. "Ken did what he had to do, and gave us a shake. The re-fit was worth every penny; we have lots of new customers, old customers come more often and spend more; people can't believe the difference. We even think we have benefited from the recession as people are less keen to spend money on petrol getting to the supermarkets and prefer to shop local. It's all good. The help we have had from the RSA, the shopfitters and from Booker has been fantastic."

### **THE RSA VIEW**

There are hundreds of rural shopkeepers in the same position as Bill and Lyn at Much Marcle, needing to spend significant sums of money to bring their shop up to twenty first century standards. In this case, the partnership between Herefordshire County Council and the RSA provided the initial advice and impetus. SJR Shopfitters (part of RSA members Team Design) and Bookers helped to make the vision a reality. But the real stars are Bill and Lyn, who provided the courage and commitment to invest the money for the necessary structural repairs and refit. And for them, it is already clear that it was the right decision. After just a few months, sales are already up about 25% and the project should pay for itself in about 3 years. The refit has also created shop standards high enough for them to join Premier Express; this next phase will ensure that the external branding will reflect the standards inside the store. The overall result is that the Bowers' shop is now a great place to shop and will be able to continue to serve its local community for the foreseeable future.

